

Dr. Marilyn Howard
Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction
States Institute on International Education
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I'm pleased to have this chance to talk to you about our recent efforts in international education.

Many people would be surprised, I suspect, at our investment in international ed, particularly given Idaho's reputation as the state that's home to great potatoes and the Aryan Nation.

The first part is true; the second is no longer true since the Aryan Nation has moved its headquarters to Alabama. There it is now a neighbor to the Southern Poverty Law Center, which bankrupted the founder of the Aryan Nation and ultimately turned his compound into a human rights center.

To those of us from Idaho, that's practically ancient history now. We're turning our eyes outward, looking at the rest of the world and coming up with new ways to educate our students about that world.

I was asked to talk about why international education is important to our state and its students.

Part of the answer is cultural and historical. Idaho is home to the largest settlement of Basques outside of Spain, and we have a lot of back-and-forth movement between our state and the Basque homeland. Our higher education institutions draw graduate students from all over the world.

In fact, before I was elected state superintendent, I was principal at an elementary school right on the edge of the University of Idaho campus, and we had a high percentage of international students going to our school. We celebrated that diversity in a variety of ways, ranging from serving foods from different nations to setting aside a space so the Muslim students could pray as their religion required them.

And despite Idaho's size and relatively low population, we've had an enormous infusion of ethnic immigration over the past few years – enough that Boise, Idaho's capital and by far its largest city at about 180,000, now has grocery stores specifically for Hispanic, Bosnian, Indian, Korean, Basque, Vietnamese and Chinese ethnic foods. That's not restaurants: these are actual grocery stores.

Part is practical. Our largest minority in Idaho is Hispanic. There is so much travel as migrant workers move back and forth that we have had to form strong educational ties with Mexico's schools as a way to make sure those students aren't disadvantaged by transferring from one system to another and back again.

Part is economic. I tore this article out of last month's Horizon Airlines magazine. It's about Idaho's international trade. Our largest trading partner is Canada, which should come as no surprise since we're neighbors. Our second largest is the United Kingdom, which did come as a surprise – enough that I called Idaho's Department of Commerce and Labor to find out what kind of business we do with the UK. It turns out they buy our electronic products, mainly the memory chips manufactured in Boise, our capital.

The third and fourth largest markets are Japan and China. Mexico, by far our largest people partner, is only our 10th largest trading partner.

Incidentally, I led an international educational delegation from Idaho to China last summer. We spent one interesting afternoon at the Agricultural Trade Office, getting briefed on how Idaho's products are marketed there. Talk about stereotypes: I guess most of us assumed that our potato and wheat crops wouldn't be that much in demand in a place where rice is such a staple. The overseas trade organizer said that was true for Southern China but not for Northern China, where there's a big market for starches other than rices. So we all learned something.

Over the last five years, Idaho's international trade has grown 30 percent. The Department of Commerce and Labor international trade staff has grown from one person to five full-time positions. That's almost as many international trade representatives as I have curriculum specialists in the State Department of Education.

So those are the historical, cultural, economic and simply practical reasons for our interest in the larger world.

But beyond all that is the philosophical rationale. Whether it's the war in Iraq, the privatization efforts in Russia in which a young man from Idaho played a key role, the concerns over the bombings in Spain, the infusion of African immigrants throughout Idaho, there are more and more events in other nations that really hit home here in Idaho.

We want our students to hear that news and then make informed judgments about what that does or does not mean to Idaho. We want them to realize that Idaho is not the isolated and indifferent state some might believe it to be, but rather a state with an economic and human stake in those events. And when those students take their places as Idaho's citizens and leaders, we want them to have all that information in hand so they can make more intelligent decisions.

With all that in mind, we have formed an international education team of teachers at every level: elementary, middle, and secondary. Their job is to study as much as they can, take part in visits to other selected nations, visit schools and talk to both students and other educators while they are there, and eventually return to Idaho to write lesson and activity plans that will introduce Idaho kids to their counterparts elsewhere.

Obviously it's a little more complicated than that. For example, the international education lesson plans also have to be aligned to Idaho's achievement standards so that we don't divert students from the goals we have set for them. But the idea is to infuse a layer of international considerations into the normal language, math, social studies, and science topics that Idaho students are covering.

A second aspect of our effort has to do with teacher exchanges. We are already a member of a Bi-National Exchange with Mexico, under which 19 teachers have come to Idaho to teach during the summer months. More and more Idaho teachers are taking advantage of short-term programs to visit and teach in other nations. For example, I was visiting a school that specializes in science while I was in Shanghai last summer, and one of the first people I met was a teacher from Meridian – 7 miles outside of Boise – who had taken a six-month appointment there to help students with their English. We also took as part of our team an American Field Service representative who made a lot of contacts for the student exchanges that are such a great investment in future relations.

If I could wave my magic wand and put a full international education program in place right now, it would include more teacher and student exchanges, the creation of more sister school relationships via the Internet, more exchanges between educational policy-makers who are interested in what other nations are doing with their school programs.

I was interested, for example, to visit the Chinese Ministry of Education and learn that even as we here in the U.S. are seeing more and more testing, the Chinese are looking at new ways to encourage more student-teacher questioning and interactions. They want to get away from the prep-for-the-test mentality, even as we seem to be moving more in that direction.

But perhaps the grass always looks greener elsewhere. Not that many years ago, as educators in America were bombarded with tales about the virtues of the regimented and disciplined Japanese educational system, a team of Japanese educators visited Idaho to find out how to encourage more creative thinking and problem solving. Put most simply, we all have a lot to learn from one another.

I am aware that both not-for-profit organizations and the federal government have for years provided a variety of opportunities for college and university personnel to travel and work abroad. There are fewer opportunities for high school, middle, and elementary teachers to do that. I'd like to see more of these subsidies, because my own experience as an elementary principal suggests the best place to start is as early as possible.

We've made an effort in Idaho to include in our planning representatives of both the legislative and executive branches of government, and along with teachers we've had businessmen, state employees, and higher education representatives as part of our planning and implementation.

To date, no one has turned us down; no one has said, “Oh, we don’t need to know about those other places.” There’s a clear recognition in our small, rural state that Idaho is tied to all other nations, and, I believe, a consensus that the best way to foster those ties over the long haul is to start now, in our schools, as we help our students understand what it truly means to live as a citizen of the world.

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